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## Another major defense company interested in ND drone park

By DAVE KOLPACK, Associated Press  
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FARGO, N.D. (AP) — The nation's first unmanned aircraft business park currently under construction in North Dakota has a second major defense contractor interested in setting up shop.

Linden P. Blue, the CEO of General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc., plans to visit in July to look into Grand Sky, a 1.2 million-square-foot park located on Grand Forks Air Force Base property. The base recently switched its operations from air refueling tankers to unmanned aircraft.

U.S. Rep. Kevin Cramer said the General Atomics affiliate is looking not only to test aircraft, but train pilots. "They're the kind of prospect that has more than a casual interest, for sure," Cramer said.

Among the unmanned aerial systems General Atomics produces are drones for military combat missions. The MQ-1 Predator drones are being flown by the North Dakota Air National Guard and MQ-9 Reaper planes are being used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Several graduates of the University of North Dakota aviation school are among the more than 6,000 employees for the San Diego-based company.

Already, defense technology company Northrop Grumman last month signed a lease to become the park's lead tenant, finalizing a plan that had been in the works for years. Northrop Grumman makes the RQ-4 Global Hawk drone, which is considered particularly valuable because it can conduct long-range missions, fly at 60,000 feet and roam in a particular area for 24 hours or more.

"I always have been a big believer in momentum, and someone like Northrop Grumman signing that lease, that's momentum," Cramer said.

The momentum continued this past week at an international trade show in Atlanta, where Grand Sky Development President Tom Swoyer said he received inquiries from seven companies. A handful of other businesses also have publicly expressed their interest, he said.

"The questions I heard were, 'What do I have to do to get space, what's the process, how fast can I get it, and what does it cost?'" Swoyer said.

In addition to the fledgling tech park, North Dakota is one six sites around the country testing unmanned aircraft and the only one to receive approval from the Federal Aviation Administration to fly in expanded airspace. Airspace, Swoyer said, was the No. 1 topic at the Atlanta convention.